DECAPITATING CINEMA

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> The indiscernability of the real and the imaginary, or of the present and the past, of the actual and the virtual, is definitely not produced in the head or the mind, it is the objective characteristic of certain existing images which are by nature double.
>
> —Gilles Deleuze[1]

> Take this from this, is this be otherwise.
>
> —Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II.2

> When thou seest in the pathway a severed head . . . / Ask of it, ask of it the secrets of the heart: / For of it thou wilt learn of our hidden mystery.
>
> –Jalal al-Din Rumi[2]

Cinema and decapitation are intimately related. They touch, sharply. "Severing also is still a joining and relating."[3] This is the generative principle both of film as spliced cuts and of capital consciousness as asymmetrical or this-sided bi-location. Thinking the relation between decapitation and cinema thus reopens at once the multiplicative hydra-essence of head (Fig. 2) and the self-severing core of cinema (Fig. 1), beheading-and-cinema's being one-in-two and two-in-one.[4]

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[1] *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galatea (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 69. "Cinema, therefore, has the power of taking thought beyond its own fixed images of itself and the world; we can think of images that are no longer images *of* some being" (Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze* [New York: Routeledge, 2002], 54.

[2] *Selected Poems from the Divani Shamzi Tabriz*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977], II.5-8

[3] "[A]uch das Trennen ist noch ein Verbinden und Beziehen" (Martin Heidegger, "Logik: Heraklits Lehre vom Logos," in *Heraklit*, 'Gesamtausgabe,' Bd. 55 [Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1970], 337).

[4] Cf. "I lowered my neck and said, 'Cut off the head of a prostrator with Dhu 'l-Faqār.' / The more he struck with the sword, the more my head grew, till heads a myriad sprouted from my neck" (*Mystical Poems of Rūmī*, trans. A. J. Arberry, 2 vols. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968], 139.5-6). Dhu 'l-Faqār is 'Alī's double-edged sword. Cinema's double blade (a binary contradictory ontology being the essence of the image: the phantasm always both real and not-real) correlatively multiplies one's head through a process of self-splicing whose well-known immediate after-effect is the strong leaving-the-theatre feeling that 'life' is a dream. *That* life is dream or spec(tac)ular production of the cosmic abyss can only be *seen* heedlessly. "You do not own your head. / There are so many heads in the world, / wherever you go there are heads. / Everyday there are more of them / sprouting up in the blackness" (Current 93 & Thomas Ligotti, "You Do Not Own Your Head," *The Unholy City* [PanDurtro, 2003]). The experiments of Lovecraft's acephalic protagonist are similarly ordered toward uncanny proliferations: "I can still see Herbert West under the sinister electric light as he injected his reanimating solution into the arm of the headless body. The scene I cannot describe – I should faint if I tried it, for there is madness in a room full of classified charnel things, with blood and lesser human debris almost ankle-deep on the slimy floor, and with hideous reptilian abnormalities sprouting, bubbling, and baking over a winking bluish-green spectre of dim flame in a far corner of black shadows" (H.P. Lovecraft, *Herbert West: Reanimator*).

Figure 3. Tzompantli or skull rack on the Day of the Dead in Mexico City

The human tendency to proximately assemble severed heads, whether architecturally (e.g. Timur's pyramids) or arboreally (the Japanese character *Ken*, signifying 'prefecture', portrays a head hung upside down in a tree), betrays an impulse to restore head to multiplicative fecundity, to the spectacle of life as *undying generation of the dead*. "Davison and Sutlive argue that the ritual significance of Iban headhunting is sustained by an 'organic metaphor of frugiferous reproduction, rather than one of phallic procreation'. . . . In highland Suwalesi, Sumba, and

Figures 1 and 2. Ray Harryhausen with his Medusa head and the artist's Hydra from *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963)

Cinematic experience is decapitation in a basic phenomenal sense of being a kind of headless seeing, a technologization of the decollative logic of re-presentation itself: seeing *as* head what is not present *to* one's head. The camera through which one cinematically sees is a head-severing severed head.[5] They used to mount the heads of traitors on poles, now they mount cameras (Fig. 10 and 11).[6]

Timor, heads are described as 'fruits' or 'rice sheaves' and are harvested from 'trees'" (Janet Hoskins, "Introduction: Headhunting as Practice and as Trope," in *Headhunting and the Social Imagination in Southeast Asia*, ed. Janet Hoskins [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996], 22-3). Cephalic fruit theatre, capital spectator sport, keep your ball on the eye. On the Mesoamerican *tzompantli*, at once wall and tree, see Rubén G. Mendoza, "The Divine Gourd Tree: Tzompantli Skull Racks, Decapitation Rituals, and Human Trophies in Ancient Mesoamerica," chapter 14 of *The Taking and Displaying of Human Body Parts as Trophies by Amerindians*, eds. Richard J. Chacon and David H. Dye (New York: Springer, 2007). Plotinus understands the situation perfectly, namely, the real interior according to which the array of severed spectators is simply a hyper-literal expression of what we always see: "When we look outside of that on which we depend we ignore our unity; looking outward we see many faces; look inward and all is the one head" (*Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna [New York: Larson, 1992], 6.5.7).

[5] The equation is exposed in Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971), in which shots of the king's severed head are spliced with shots from its perspective while being carried through a crowd and displayed atop a pole (Figs. 4-6). "Only later do we realize that Polanski's subjective camera has positioned us, the audience, *inside* the severed head, so that we too are experiencing the terminal spasms of sensory apprehension, the death throes, *after* the beheading" (Kenneth Sprauge Rothwell, *A History of Shakespeare on Screen*, 2nd ed. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 20024], 151). Encoding the gaze of cinema itself, its witnessing of being-seen, the very last thing the head/camera sees is the society of the spectacle for which it is being displayed. See how the spectators are framically imprisoned by the walls they are outside of.

Figures 4-6. Roman Polanski, *Macbeth* (1971)

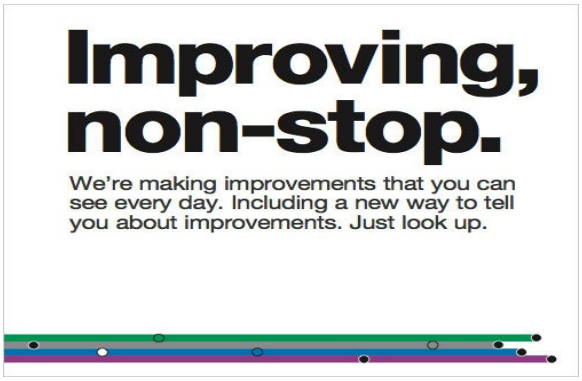
[6] The link is predictably evident in the ambit of London: "Surveillance cameras on poles. Severed heads" (Iain Sinclair, *London Orbital: A Walk Around the M25* [London: Granta, 2002), 91. Cf. ". . . a sudden acid twist, a sting in the tail that comes from

the knowledge that we may be looking at a transmitter, a surveillance camera, a coxcomb or a severed head on a tall pole" (James Hamilton, *The Sculpture of Austin Wright* [London: Henry Moore Foundation and Lund Humphries, 1994], 72). A sculpture by Ryan Standfest, entitled "The Werkwelt Apparatus (A Model)" (2011) and included in the "Heads On Poles" show at Western Exhibitions gallery curated by Paul Nudd and Scott Wolniak (thanks to Vincent Como for the reference), mounts a severed head on a tripod (http://www.westernexhibitions.com). In place of eyes the head has a cyclopean projector lens in front and View-Master mounted into the rear of skull, apparently allegorizing a projective theory of consciousness. Emanating from the mouth is a double-sided speech bubble that chiastically joins and severs seeing/knowing and I/you distinctions: on one side is written *I see what I know*, on the other *You see what I do not know*. Among other things, the sculpture points up the specular dynamic more generally at play in seeing the mounted surveillance camera or severed head. Where the displayed head places the subject as seen by the state through the dead eyes of a traitor, the mounted camera makes one visible within the light of a kind of dead, capitally punished lens, an eye robbed of a life of its own. Where the former shows power over heads who think against the head of the body politic, the latter places you before the negative visibility of your own thought in the occluded captured image of your body. The pleasure of looking a security camera 'in the eye' is thus all about reflecting its 'dead' gaze within a kind of contentless and objectless epistemologically threatening boast: I know that 'you' see me, but not what I am thinking. That is, my proper and pure response to the surveillance of the severed head/camera is to reflect back my own decapitalized gaze, the alienated-alienating look of a virtually severed head that says: you have my head, my image, but you do not have *me*. The limit of which is the exploding head of the surveilled.

Figure 7. David Cronenberg, *Scanners* (1981)

Through whose gore may be calculated the look that self-severed heads of suicide bombers, reversely decapitated through body-obliteration, necrotically literalize, particularly when the images are made public, whether to criminally identify the attackers, as in the Moscow Metro bombings of March 28, 2010, or to glorify them, as in the case of Zainab Ali Issa Abu Salem (Fig. 9), whose pre- and post-severed head were shown together in the newspaper *Al-fateh* with the following caption: "Suicide Bomber Zainab Abu Salem: Her head separated from her pure body, and her Ra'ala [Muslim headscarf] remains to decorate [her face]. Her place is in paradise, where in the highest heavens, Zainab . . . sister [who has been raised to the level] of men." Such doubling retrospective documentary identification of the living and dead head represents the *temporal inverse* of Christian iconographic depiction of the saint as eternally recapitalized cephalophore (Fig. 8).

Figures 8 and 9. Ambrogio Lorenzetti's Saint Catherine of Siena (above) and *Al-fateh*'s Zainab Ali Issa Abu Salem (below)



Figures 10 and 11. David Fryer, *Banker's Heads on London Bridge*[7] and a recent MTA subway poster[8]

Going to the movies is a correlatively reversed form of collective treason, a seeing of the world via heads that are no longer/never were one's own. Cinematic headlessness is not so much an effect of cameral technology as cinema itself is the materialization of desire for, or embodied movement (from *kinein*, move) towards, headlessness. Movie is the camerally severing site of the head's *projection* into the post-cephalic. CUT!

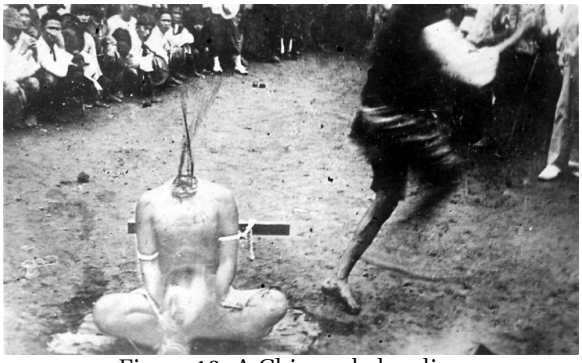


Figure 13. A Chinese beheading

Note how the spaces of the photograph's becoming-film, its zones of movement, are also places of severing, real and virtual.[9] Here, in the deep shallows of film, non-accidental analogue of the liminal phantasmatic substance of conscious experience itself (*barzakh*), there is no distinction between the severing that the

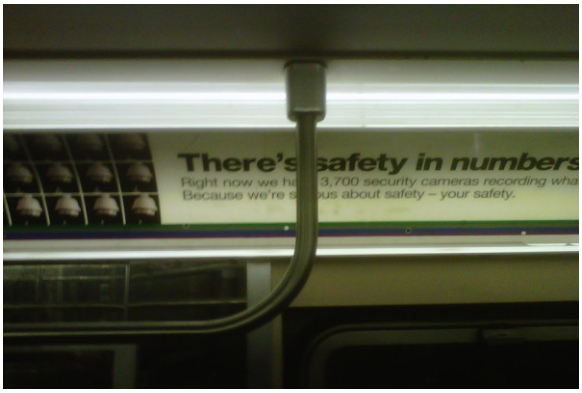


Figure 12. MTA information campaign poster

[7] Part of C.R.A.S.H. Culture, a project of The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination (http://www.labofii.net/). The project is explained in a video, in which David Fryer mentions intending the installation to mimic the crucifixion of Jesus between two thieves (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASCW5XGJWkw). This echoes the display of the heads of Archbishop and Chancellor Simon Sudbury, Treasurer Robert Hales, and the wealthy Franciscan physician William Appleton during the Revolt of 1381, on which see Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 98ff. My fantasy is that Fryer did this heedlessly, *without* thinking specifically of the 14th-century precedent.

[8] Another poster (Fig. 12) from the same information campaign shows a row of security cameras with the caption, "Strength in numbers," implicitly linking the cameras with the observant heads of the populace, all the more so in light of the preceding "If you see something, say something" security campaign. The 'democratizing' logic is perfect: the cameras are *everyone's* severed heads, a pupil-less panopticon. To whom does one report seeing a security camera?

[9] "Of photographic representation, we must say that, even more than the sun of a unique reason illuminating the diversity of its objects, it is a vision-flux forever indivisible with the unlimited space of fiction that is the finished photo" (François Laruelle, *The Concept of Non-Photography*, trans. Robin Mackay [New York/Falmout: Urbanomic/Sequence, 2011], 20). Cf. "Your just a picture / You're an image caught in time" (Dio, "Rainbow in the Dark," *Holy Diver* [Warner, 1983]).

camera is capturing and the severing that the camera is causing.[10] Cinema is the dilation of this space into a flow, the articulation of the cut into a current, the circulation of severing into an anamorphic life-fountain: animation.

Before

The close relation between cinema and beheading is traceable into its technic anteriority, among topoi where decapitation and visuality move together in a dynamic manner that is 'proto'-cinematic. Take three examples, each of which allegorizes the invention of cinema in a different way: Caravaggio's *Medusa*, Dante's Bertran de Born, and al-Hallāj's martyrdom. The first mobilizes representational *severing* (the sword of the brush) as an engine of extra-cephalic gaze, the power of vision to cinematically extend beyond the head without ever losing it, to process in an unending ocular loop that intensively multiplies the head as site of vision by cutting it off. The second seizes the *projective* structure of cinematic consciousness, its realization of vision as the substantial extramission of self or soul into fields of experience whose unitary immanence, precisely by virtue of this

projective constitution, is essentially unrepresentable — the vision-in-Many of total overwhelming illusion. The third produces *script* as the confiscated sine qua non of the cinema-event, the essential supplement or exterior medium whose disappearance ensures a secret identity between the entire cinematographic apparatus and the transcendental captivity of the viewer as the martyred subject of film.

Medusa's head, seeable only as reflection, as image, is severed by a hero who enters her place by grasping an eye in the duration of its passing between two persons (Graeae), that is, by someone who seizes the substance between frames or masters the movement-image, the eye

[10] Ibn Arabi's concept of the *barzakh* or isthmus, according to which all entities exist between inner and outer worlds, powerfully articulates the 2-in-1-and-1-in-2 structure and its relation to imaginal perception. Everything is two-faced: "For an isthmus (*barzakh*) is not an isthmus unless it has two faces, each one facing the two things between which it is an isthmus. There is no existent but God (Allah), but He has brought about the appearance of things [in existence] through secondary causes, and the thing which is caused can have no existence except through that cause. So each caused thing has a face towards the cause and a face towards God, and so it is a *barzakh* between the cause and God" (*Futûhât al-Makkîya* [Meccan Illuminations], Chapter 297, cited from www.ibnarabisociety.org/courses/Session3Texts.pdf) . This is illustrated by the example of the line – "Know that the word *barzakh* is an expression for what *separates* two things without ever becoming either of them, such as the line separating a shadow from the sunlight" (*Futûhât al-Makkîya*, chapter 63, trans. James. W. Morris, forthcoming) – and the image in the mirror: "The *barzakh* is nothing but Imagination. If you possess the power of reasoning and you perceive the image you realize that you have perceived an affair of existence, on which your sight has fallen. But you immediately know, with manifest certainty, that originally there was nothing there to be witnessed. Then what is the thing for which you have affirmed *entified* existence, and that you negated even in the very state of affirming it? Imagination is neither existent nor nonexistent, neither known nor unknown, neither affirmed nor negated. A person who sees his image in the mirror knows decisively that he has perceived his form in some respect and that he has not perceived his form in some other respect. Then if he says: 'I saw my form I did not see my form,' he will be neither a truth teller nor a liar. What is then the truth of the perceived form? The form is negated and affirmed, existent and nonexistent, known and unknown" (*Futûhât al-Makkîya*, chapter 304, cited from Salman H. Bashier, *Ibn al-'Arabi's* Barzakh*: The Concept of the Limit and the Relationship between God and the World* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004), 18. Speculation is decollative.

itself as intra-visual motion.[11] Perseus is a cinematographer. The identity of beheading and specular representation embodied in Medusa's head is captured in Caravaggio's shield painting (Fig. 14) which, through a double *trompe-l'oeil* (a representation of a reflection), decapitates painting itself and bleeds into cinema.[12] Allegorically, the painting captures the *reel*, the principle of curvilinear synthesis whereby image becomes aesthetic movement, the interstitial swarm within image itself that makes all image-to-image transitions possible. What is impossible to see directly, what cannot be presently gazed at, is the identity of this swarm with head itself as synthesizing agency *par excellence*, the consciousness-point which is never perspectivally in place at all, is never a fixed viewing platform, but is always extra-locatively on the move. That is, cinema moves only through the essential snakiness of the head, the wholesale flexibility of capital consciousness and its specific articulation as visual flux capacitator, the unseen thing that flows image into itself. From this perspective we may say that the severed head is the serpentine and spirally ouroboric *reel* of cinema, a literal figuration or projection of the head's removal of itself from itself that is necessary for synthetically seeing the world in the first place, for grasping, like a snake its own tail, the flow of time in the auto-affective touch of imaginal and phantasmatic curvature. It is exactly this synthetic self-severing that is seen each time one perceives the essential unseeability of the cinematic image, the skewed or twisting difference between my gaze and its kinetic *look* (concretized by Caravaggio in Medusa's downward stare), so that, unlike Narcissus, I can continue to witness without subjective collapse the unreality of the real.[13]

[11] "Through subtle wiles and guile, the son of Danae [Perseus]—while one was passing that eye to the other—stretched out his hand and intercepted it" (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum [New York: Harcourt, 1993], 4.776-7).

[12] "I see the mirror's decapitation of self-referential representation, or in other words, the separation of the painting's head from its body. I see decapitation of the gaze that defines the 'subject' to be painted and the 'subject' of the painter's design. I also see the gesture of the hand and body that pose there, in the painting that is both mirror and support, in the painting and on its surface, as a represented object, the slashing of the subject: the painter's brushstroke, the stroke of Perseus's sword" (Louis Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, trans. Mette Hjort [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995], 132). In perfect counterpoint to al-Hallaj's tetragrammatic blood (see below), Caravaggio signs his own name with the blood of John the Baptist:

Figure 15. Caravaggio, *The Beheading of John the Baptist* (detail)

[13] Alan Singer analyzes the cinematic structure of the painting in *The Self-Deceiving Muse: Notice and Knowledge in the Work of Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 2010), 86-96. His description of seeing-as-decapitation articulates the drama of the gaze, the snaky visual movement between opposite poles of beheading and petrification (beheading being also a 'freezing' of the head and petrification also a severing of body from its own substance), through which this cinematic continuing to witness takes place: "there is also a sense that the act of viewing entails our own decapitation. . . . the effect is complicated by our realization that we are inoculated against the gorgon's spell by the downward cast of her eyes. For her angle of vision courts the illusion of our reciprocal ascent, on a line of sight that leads speculatively to the place where Perseus keeps his victorious grip on the monstrous trophy. But it also invites us to make eye contact from below where we might, everything else notwithstanding, risk sharing the fate of Medusa's victims" (95). On painting as decapitation of the painter, a motif of Caravaggio's work, see Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, 142. Brigitte Peucker deploys Marin's reading of Medusa to read Hitchcock's films in *The Material Image: Art and the Real in Film* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), chapter 4. Note that the technical converse of unseeable gaze, the invisible eye that see you, now takes the form of the *snake cam*. The Israeli military has developed a robotic one that crawls.

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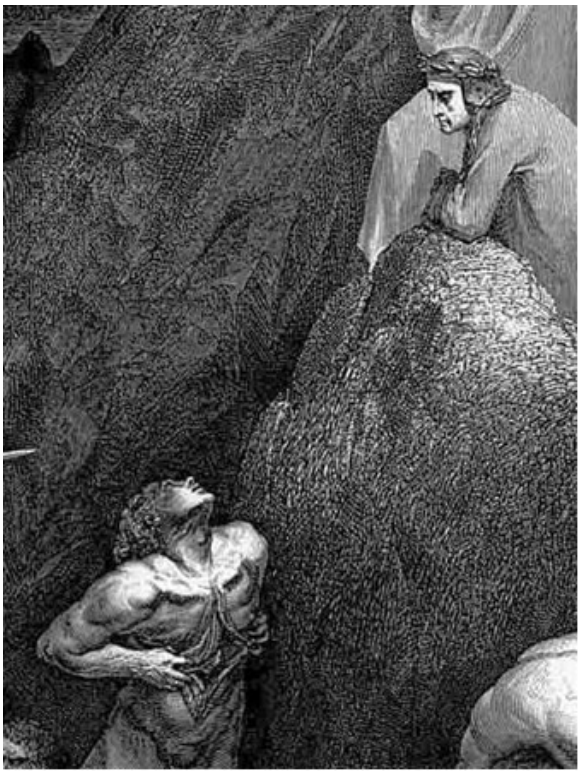
The path to Dante's cephalophore, the crowning figure of *Inferno* 28 who uniquely incarnates the spectacular signifying essence of life in hell – "Così s'osserva in me lo contrapasso" (*Inf* 28.142) [Thus is observed in me the retribution] – is prepared by a meta-bellic spectacle of human carnage situated quantitatively beyond the threshold of discourse.

> Chi poria mai pur con parole sciolte
> dicer del sangue e de le piaghe a pieno
> ch'i' ora vidi, per narrar più volte?
> Ogne lingua per certo verria meno
> per lo nostro sermone e per la mente
> c'hanno a tanto comprender poco seno.
> (28.1-6)[14]

> Who could ever fully tell, even in unfettered words, though many times narrating, the blood and the wounds that I now saw? Surely every tongue would fail, because of our speech and our memory which have little capacity to comprehend so much.

Psychically previewing Bertran de Born's own detached brain, the pilgrim's ocular head here occupies the visually severed, essentially cameral and independent position of that which takes in the immanent plenitude of an *all* that does not and never will enter into any perspectival assimilation.[15] Here language can only attest, via a negative deixis, to a witnessed something that remains ungraspable and unrepresentable as object, what Dante nominates only in the mode of a manner or way — "il modo de la nona bolgia sozzo" (28.21) [the foul fashion of the ninth pouch] — that no reassembly of the war-slain would ever equal ("d'aequar sarebbe nulla" 28.20). The overt emphasis on the power of vision in this canto,[16] in addition to being a poetic



recognition of gore's incommensurable sensory excess, the aesthetic crisis of seeing the unspeakable, thus enters more deeply into the violence of vision itself and its special correlation to the unitive-partitive structures of scandal and schism. This violence may be conceived as the cinema of seeing per se, its self/world-severing movement, according to which the overwhelming spectacle of disjoined bodies is properly understood to be not only a certain kind of seen thing but a *transparency* of vision, a seeing-through into what vision itself is, namely, a force of dis-cernment, a specular mirror-knife that seizes world by cutting-splicing into its indivisible unity. It is precisely this force that is displayed through the pilgrim's gazing into the first "seminator di scandalo e di scisma" (28.35) [sower of scandal and schism] he meets, the prophet Mohammed (Fig 16: Gustave Doré, "The Mutilated Shade of Mahomet"):

> Mentre che tutto in lui veder m'attacco,
> guardommi e con le man s'aperse il petto,
> dicendo: "Or vedi com' io mi dilacco!

[14] Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi, trans. Charles S. Singleton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

[15] "One does not photograph the World, the City, History, but the identity (of) the real-in-the-last-instance which has nothing to do with all of that" (François Laruelle, *Concept of Non-Photography*, 48).

[16] See Suzanne Conklin Akbari, *Seeing through the Veil: Optical Theory and Medieval Allegory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 151-3. Akbari traces a transition from extromissive to intromissive metaphors across the *Commedia* and their transcendent synthesis in the vision of God (in both senses).

> vedi come storpiato è Mäometto!
> (28.28-31)

> While I was all absorbed in gazing on him, he looked at me and with his hands pulled open his breast, saying, "Now see how I rend myself, see how mangled is Mohammed!"[17]

Mohammed effectively separates himself under Dante's attaching/attacking gaze (*m'attacco*), returning a look that invites and effects further opening, a dilation whose freshness and non-finality is marked by the verbal aperture of a neologism (*mi dilacco*, I open, separate myself).[18] Between the poet and the prophet's canonically unportrayed face there is an affectively cinematic loop, the impressional interplay ('press play') of a moving unity-in-separation and separation-in-unity that subtly re-experiences without regress the traumatic circle that all the discord-sowers tread.[19] Rather than merely reenacting or recording the torment, the filmic encounter (in the sense of an event that that passes within and is traced upon a subtle medium of shared vision between the living and the dead) reproposes it in a space that is itself dynamically open and capable of new forms of knowledge and experience, of scientific event, a space marked out by the multiplicative dilation of the present beyond past and future that the pilgrim's interventive musing over Mohammed initiates:[20]

> "Ma tu chi se' che 'n su lo scoglio muse,
> forse per indugiar d'ire a la pena
> ch'è giudicata in su le tue accuse?"

Figure 17. Iraqi soldier holds up the head of a dead suicide bomber

Note how Mohammed's repetition of *come* [how] continues the bloody modal rubric of the ninth bolgia cited above ("il modo . . ." 28.21), as if gore is essentially a negative intensity of *style*. Cf. "I have said that the bodies were frightfully mangled. Now I must add that some were incised and subtracted from in the most curious, cold-blooded, and inhuman *fashion*" (H. P. Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness* [New York: Modern Library, 2005], Chapter 4, my italics).

[17] The auto-imperative (a command that also works upon itself, *see how I* . . .) captures the self-maiming logic of schism – doing violence to the body of which one is part: "the schismatic intends to sever himself from that unity [*intendit se ab uniate separare*] which charity creates" (Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, II-II.39.1) – and eerily prophesies the terroristic mangling of Islam (Fig. 17).

[18] The auto-opening evokes the *al-sharh* or dilation of Sura 94 in the Koran, "Did we not dilate your breast . . ." interpreted as God's opening of Mohammed's chest and purification of his heart. Karla Mallette calls the scene "a grotesquerie, a carnivalesque inversion of an episode recounted with awe in the Islamic popular tradition" ("Muhammad in Hell," *Dante Studies* 125(2007): 213 – an awe in which the pilgrim's gaze also participates. Crescini comments, as cited in Singleton, "*Lacca* is the 'haunch,' the 'thigh' . . . . *dilaccare* means 'to separate, divide, spread, open the thighs'; and therefore it generally means 'to spread,' 'to open'." The sexual connotation reinforces the cooperational structure of the encounter, the sense in which staring is an aesthetic copulation with its object, as well as exacerbates the infernal unmanning of Islamic militancy.

[19] Mohammed explains to the pilgrim: "Un diavolo è qua dietro che n'accisma / sì crudelmente, al taglio de la spade / rimettendo ciascun di questa risma, / quand' avem volta la dolente strada; / però che le ferite son richiuse / prima ch'altri dinanzi li rivada" (28-37-42) [A devil is here behind that fashions us thus cruelly, putting again to the edge of the sword each of this throng when we have circled the doleful road; for the wounds are closed up before any of us pass again before him].

[20] A present all the more poignant in light of the fact that *the* present is precisely what hell-denizens do not see, as Farinata explains in *Inferno* 10.100-8. Infernal knowledge advances only towards an absolutely final decapitation: "tutta morta / fia nostra conoscienza da quell punto / che del future fia chiusa la porta" (*Inf* 10.106-8) [all our knowledge will be dead from that moment when the door of the future shall be closed].

"Né morte 'l giunse ancor, né colpa 'l
mena,"
Rispuose 'l mio maestro, "a tormentarlo;
ma per dar lui esperïenza piena,
a me, che morto son, convien menarlo
per lo 'nferno qua giù di giro in giro;
e quest' è ver così com' io ti parlo."
Più fuor di cento che, quando l'udiro,
s'arrestaron nel fosso a riguardarmi
per maraviglia, oblïando il martiro.
(28. 46-54)

"But who are you that are musing on the ridge, perhaps to delay going to the punishment pronounced on your own accusations?"

"Neither has death yet reached him, nor does guilt bring him for torment," replied my master, "but in order to give him full experience, it behooves me, whom am dead, to lead him down here through Hell from circle to circle; and this is as true as that I speak to you."

More than a hundred there were who, when they heard him, stopped in the ditch to look at me, forgetting their torment in their wonder.

Mutually saturated and suspended in an indeterminate medium, the neither-subjective-nor-objective mood wherein consciousness is cinematically *captured*, these moments collectively mark, without collapse of their distinctions, a plenitude of experience that is paradoxically available in the positive forgetfulness of wonderful detachment.[21] Note the formal continuity across several instances of abeyance: the poet's musing, the perceived possibility of his being one of the damned, Virgil's definition of the reality of Dante's otherworldly journey in terms of verbal facticity — a wry reflection of the fictive actuality of *poetic* vision, the again-looking of marveling that momentarily forestalls pain. Fusing these in a dilated moment of inoperative suspense, the scene produces a spectacle homologous to the oxymoronically headless perspective of cinematic experience, its production of post-capital points of view for the head. Just as filming first-person experience ironically requires cameral displacement of the actor's/character's head, so the narrator's first-person view — "s'arrestaron . . . a riguardami" [they stopped to regard me] — is not a stable position but a mobile yet nevertheless substantial relation between his being looked at and the dead poet's 'impossible' witnessing that he is/was indeed there, a relation that obliviates without negating Dante's own cephalic,

[21] I borrow the term 'positive forgetfulness' from the Supplement to Meher Baba's *God Speaks*: "The whole philosophy of approaching and realizing the Truth hinges on the question of what we may call forgetfulness. The word 'forgetfulness' used here must not be associated with its commonly accepted meaning of forgetting to post a letter, or of a state of mind that is simply dull and blank. Forgetfulness in this special sense is an attitude of mind that develops gradually into spiritual experience. External renunciation is not forgetfulness, because it is mostly physical and partly mental; but internal renunciation, when it becomes purely mental, does assume the quality and dignity of forgetfulness. Thus one may renounce the world, but it is not so easy to forget it. Forgetfulness in this special sense thus explains the secret that lies behind all happiness, spiritual or otherwise, that human beings experience. The Sufi term for this forgetfulness is *bikhudi*, and it should not be mixed up—though it often is—with *bihoshi* (unconsciousness). . . . The whole philosophy of happiness and unhappiness therefore hinges on the question of forgetfulness of some kind or another, and of remembrance of some kind or another. Remembrance is an attachment of the mind to a particular idea, person, thing or place, and forgetfulness is its opposite. Once it is understood that remembrance causes pain, it follows that the only cure is some kind of forgetfulness, and this forgetfulness may be either positive or negative. The positive forgetfulness is one in which the mind remains aware of external stimuli, but refuses to react to them. The negative forgetfulness is either mere unconsciousness—a stopping of the mind as in sound sleep—or an acceleration of it as in madness, which has been defined as a way of avoiding the memory of suffering. Either sleep or madness may be artificially induced in various degrees by the use of intoxicants or drugs; but this also is a negative way of overcoming remembrance. Positive forgetfulness, then, is the cure, and its steady cultivation develops in man that balance of mind which enables him to express such noble traits as charity, forgiveness, tolerance, selflessness and service to others. One who is not equipped with this positive forgetfulness becomes a barometer of his surroundings. His poise is disturbed by the slightest whisper of praise or flattery, and by the faintest suggestion of slander or criticism; his mind is like a slender reed swayed by the lightest breeze of emotion. Such a man is perpetually at war with himself and knows no peace" (211-13). Cf. *Purgatorio* 2.67-75.

essentially self-located identity.[22] In other words, Dante here produces a scene — and this exposes why the *Commedia* exceeds and eludes cinematography, because its author is at once director, protagonist, and *camera* — that dramatizes full experience [*esperïenza piena*] as a certain kind of headless seeing comparable to cinema in which vision is presently drawn beyond, yet strangely without being severed from, capital ego-perspective or the inherent individualization of consciousness. Of course this seeing is something the poem does not and cannot *say*, something instead to be drawn from and illuminated within the text – a procedure comparable to photography as a hyperselective and erotically tendentious letting-something-be-drawn-by-its-own-light.

So Dante and the sowers of discord, with Mohammed as focal point, may be here construed as pausing to motionally photograph or film each other *avant la lettre*, that is, prior to any captioning of photography, of what it is *for* or what it *represents*. Photography in a non-photographical sense: "One does not photography the World, the City, History, but the identity (of) the real-in-the-last-instance which has nothing to do with all of that."[23] The positive cinematic potentiality of the scenario is thus co-substantial with a kind of bleeding of experience into the Real beyond history, a creative present-minded forgetfulness operative through cameral anarchy: "Photography is a positive and irrevocable chaotizing of the Cosmos. All is lived in an ultimate manner in the affect and in the mode of . . . non-thetic identity."[24] The affect of non-thetic identity is the feeling of a being that is post-capitally positioned, that no longer places itself (*tithenai*, to set, to establish) within, nor alienates itself from, the head, but which rather sees Identity or experiences the real as vision-in-One – a seeing that allows the locus of vision, via vision's inherently screenic or 'panpsychist' *theoretical* mobility, to bleed beyond its fictive anchoring in the head, a vision that, in the midst of being someone, no longer hesitates to let vision itself be seen by *no-one*.[25] The decapitating lesson to be witnessed in this cinematic scene, that which prepares the way for the arrival of an actual cephalophore, is that real heedlessness is a losing of one's head *without* severing, a cutting off of head in the spontaneous wakeful forgetfulness of ever having one. This is why Dante writes "oblïando il *martiro*" [forgetting *martyrdom*], using a word that is inextricably bound, and can even alone signify, beheading as consummate *witnessing* of the invisible.[26] For the radically immanent,

[22] Cf. "How are they filmed, these first person experiences? Two ways are possible: either a headless dummy is photographed, with the camera in place of the head, or else a real man is photographed, with his head held far back, or to one side to make room for the camera. In other words, to ensure that I shall identify myself with the actor, his head is got out of the way; he must be my kind of man. For a picture of me-with-a-head is no likeness at all, it is the portrait of a complete stranger, a case of mistaken identity. [Corollary: "one does not photograph the object or the 'subject' that one sees—but rather, on condition of suspending . . . the intentionality of photography, one photographs Identity—which one does not see" (François Laruelle, *Concept of Non-Photography*, 47)] It is curious that anyone should go to the advertising man for a glimpse into the deepest– and simplest– truths about himself; odd also that an elaborate modern invention like the cinema should help rid anyone of an illusion which very young children and animals are free of. But human capacity for self-deception has surely never been complete. A profound though dim awareness of the human condition may well explain the popularity of many old cults and legends of loose and flying heads, of one eyed or headless monsters and apparitions, of human bodies with non-human heads and martyrs who (like King Charles in the ill-punctuated sentence) walked and talked after their heads were cut off — Fantastic pictures, no doubt, but nearer than common sense ever gets to a true portrait of *this* man" (Douglas Harding, *On Having No Head*).

[23] Laruelle, *Concept of Non-Photography*, 47-8. Dantean photography, the 'non-philosophy' of the *Commedia*, is thus more generally the radical immanence of the 'poem,' the identity-movie of the poem itself that is fundamentally independent of and indifferent to its apparently self-defining purposes.

[24] Laruelle, *Concept of Non-Photography*, 47-8.

[25] Cf. Harding's account of his revelation of heedlessness: "Somehow or other I had vaguely thought of myself as inhabiting this house which is my body, and looking out through its two round windows at the world. Now I find it isn't really like that at all. As I gaze into the distance, what is there at this moment to tell me how many eyes I have here – two, or three, or hundreds, or none? In fact, only one window appears on this side of my façade and that is wide open and frameless, with nobody looking out of it." (*On Having No Head*).

[26] As in John's representation of "the souls of them that were beheaded [*animas decollatorum*] for testimony [*testimonium, marturion*] of Jesus" (Rev

20:4). That Dante uses the word in relation to Holofernes (*Purg* 12.60), whose beheading by Judith is not a martyrdom in the religious sense, demonstrates its specific reference to decapitation. At the same time, the association with religious martyrdom is indelible, as in the sweetly bitter account of Dante's crusading ancestor Cacciaguida: "Quivi fu' io da quella gente turpa / disviluppato dal mondo fallace, / lo cui amor molt'anime deturpa; / e venni dal martiro a questa pace" (*Par* 15.145-48) [There by that foul folk was I released from the deceitful world, the love of which debases many souls, and I came from martyrdom to this peace]. Dante's use of the term in relation to the sowers of discord carries secondary semantic complications (which is presumably why Singleton chooses to translate with the more literal 'torment'). In addition to signifying the souls' literal pain or sensation of suffering, as well as their noetic consciousness of it (the fact *that* they are suffering), the term generates other senses, for example: 1) that their present torment is a martyrdom, a violent witnessing of/giving-witness to spiritual truth, such that the schismatic is paradoxically sanctified in hell in a kind of sublime hagiographic profanation (Cf. "We are saints / In hell . . . Abattoir, abbatoir, mon Dieu quelle horreur" [Judas Priest, "Saints in Hell," *Stained Glass*]); 2) that scandal and schism (laying traps/stumbling blocks for others and splitting off from unity) are obviated by the oblivion of martyrdom, in the sense of a forgetting of the imperative to become a martyr and/or in the sense of a retribution-defusing forgetting of martyrdom-events; 3) that by giving witness to the wonderful presence of a living being in hell the sowers of discord temporarily experience the real life within their living death, not substantially, but by a pure forgetting of the principle of witnessing-by-death, that, by a spontaneous overcoming of the idea that there is an *other* side of life that dying attests to. More generally, Dante use of *martiro* underscores concern with the question of the righteousness of those who give their lives within non-Christian faiths. Hence the importance of Mohammed as marker of schism. "Dante condemns Muhammed and Ali as individuals, not as emblematic representatives of a certain collectivity. . . . Schismatics lack 'charity' (the love that binds together the peaceful community) but they do not lack faith . . . Dante surely knew that in presenting Muhammad as a schismatic he was not calling into question the truth of Muhammad's faith. What Dante did not know is that the essence of his political vision—which involves overcoming the boundaries that divide communities against each other, yet without assimilating diversity into a single hegemonic entity—is truly consonant with the essence of Muhammad's" (Gregory B. Stone, *Dante's Pluralism and the Islamic Philosophy of Religion* [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006], 56).

almost senseless yet totally profound meaning of this phrase is its expression of a *forgetting of beheading*, the oblivion of decapitation's very possibility, or, the dawn of beheading's unforgettable impossibility.[27]

Dante's experience of the cephalophore Bertran de Born accordingly takes the form of an unforgettable special visual effect whose indelible impressionality is at once the cinematic negative of its first filming (Fig. 18: *L'Inferno*, Bertolini/Padovan, 1911), which uses a theatrical black-on-black effect to enforce optical forgetting of the body and head of the histrionically conjoined actors (an anti-impressional technique), and an intensity of the cephalophoric relation between poet and pilgrim, the two-in-one-and-one-in-two 'Dante' who makes a lamp of itself in order to walk pre-mortem in the afterlife:

> Io vidi certo, e ancor par ch'io 'l veggia,
> un busto sanza capo andar sì come
> andavan li altri de la trista greggia;
> e 'l capo tronco tenea per le chiome,
> pesol con mano a guisa di lanterna:
> e quel mirava noi e dicea: "Oh me!"
> Di sé facea a sé stesso lucerna,
> ed eran due in uno e uno in due;
> com' esser può, quei sa che sì governa.
> (28.118-26)

> Truly I saw, and seem to see it still, a trunk without the head going along as were the others of that dismal herd, and it was holding the severed head by

[27] On beheading as spectacle of the impossible, see Nicola Masciandaro, "*Non potest hoc corpus decollari*: Beheading and the Impossible," in *Heads Will Roll: Decapitation in Medieval Literature and Culture*, eds. Larissa Tracy and Jeff Massey (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2011), Chapter 1.

> the hair, swinging it in hand like a lantern, and it was gazing at us and saying: "Oh me!" Of itself it was making a lamp for itself, and they were two in one and one in two—how this can be, He knows who so ordains.

Literally reflecting the bi-locative and mnemonically dilated dynamic of consciousness itself (*truly I saw and seem to see it still*), the figure allegorizes the corporeal dilemma of being someone (*O me!*) as an essentially *projective* situation of self-severing. Here, the entity or thing that one is is revealed to be, neither a subject nor an object, but a *project*, a throwing forth of itself in and out of itself. The weird equivalence of *it* and *they* – *Di sé facea a sé stesso lucerna,* / *ed eran* [Of itself it was making a lamp for itself / and they . . .] – here corresponds to a pre-/post-numerical identity that is both outside and inside duality, namely, the openly serial identity of one who is two-in-one *and* one-in-two.[28] Formulated infernally, such an identity is the profanely literalized version of the transcendence-immanence dyad according to which the existence of God *and* cosmos is alone intelligible, as (Pseudo-)Dionysius the Areopagite, the mystical ur-cephalophore of medieval tradition, explains: "He . . . is enticed away from his transcendent dwelling place and comes to abide within all things, and he does so by virtue of his supernatural and ecstatic capacity to remain, nevertheless, within himself" (*Divine Names*, 4.13).[29] Namely, there is a palpable sense in this scene that Bertran de Born, who made "il padre e 'l figlio in sé rebelli" (28.136) [the father and the son rebel against each other], figures an anti-trinitarian *tertium quid*, an un( )holy spirit whose violent dis-integrity mark it as heretically anomalous vis-à-vis the divine cosmic system, an impossible to understand thing-that-should-not-be whose pure and supreme unintelligibility expresses something intimately and perfectly exterior to God, an excessively literal and willfully incommensurable object of divine knowledge. This cephalophore is a *real special effect* or individuated appearance that God knows, not in the mode of being its creator or designer, but solely in the capacity of being its *director*: the ultimate default position of God as one-without-a-second and ruler of all (*che sì governa*). In other words, a final identity or man-in-person that is fully and actually human in the sense proper to the non-philosophical critique of the Trinity:

> The man of whom we speak is his own real identity, the irreducible core which makes him human and does not just differentiate him from the rest of Creation, to which he otherwise belongs, *but from this as well*. Understand then that this real and not transcendent identity (in-Man) is the phenomenal content of that which theologians sought as 'person' when composing the Trinity.[30]

The cinematic lesson of Dante's Bertran is that cephalophory is the express condition of the real-in-the-last-instance, a schismatic self-belonging far better than being-no-one that endlessly places one in direct acosmic and blind relation to divine knowledge or gnosis. Cephalophory is the radically transcendent participation-in-nothing that immanence itself, far beyond its own infinite resources of

[28] This is a strong reading in the sense that I am not accepting the common gloss that would parse the singular-plural person dilemma along the body/spirit distinction, for instance, as Maramauro's commentary (1369-73) does: "ED ERANO DOI, idest lo capo e lo busto, E UNO, idest una anima sensitiva in doi parte." I prefer the reading that Dante here presents an essential contradiction or impossible reality, as Castelvetro (1570) explains with regard to divine omnipotence: "Ed eran due in uno, ed uno in due. Pare contradizione; perciochè due non possono essere uno, nè uno può esser due; e nondimeno erano uno, considerando l'unità dello spirito, che reggeva concordevolmente l'una e l'altra parte, come se fosse uno congiunto e non seperato in due; e questo medesimo spirito, perchè si divideva reggendo le due predette parti seperate, si poteva domandare essere due. E perchè questo non avviene ne' capi e ne' busti separati in questo mondo, soggiugne: Come esser può que' sa, che sì governa; cioè dio sa come questo sia possibile nello 'nferno, trattando così i dannati quando gli piace; quasi dica: dio fa queste cose, che paiono impossibili a noi, per tormentare i dannati con pene non usate." That is, the essential contradiction of a *divided person*.

[29] Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 82.

[30] François Laruelle, *Future Christ: A Lesson in Heresy*, trans. Anthony Paul Smith (New York: Continuum, 2010), 23, my emphasis.

remaining, always already secretly is. The most intimate opposite of saintly head-bearing, which instead signifies the temporal-becoming-eternal moment of martyrically seeing or finally facing one's own divine essence (Fig. 19),[31] infernal cephalophory is the real present and essentially self-severed or auto-spectral state of all who are finding themselves in this fundamentally cinematic life-in-illusion, who are enjoying suffering and suffering enjoying the vision-in-Many of being-in-universe.[32] What is special about the self-projective spectacle of Bertran de Born is that he, terribly blind to his true specialness or literal imaging forth of the situation of all, thinks the horror of being himself to be so uniquely special:

> "Or vedi la pena molesta,
> tu che, spirando, vai veggendo i morti:
> vedi s'alcuna è grande come questa."
> (28.130-2)

> "See now my grievous penalty, you who, breathing, go to view the dead: see if any other is so great as this!"

This is the ironically common error that constitutes his unique instantiation of hell, the mistaken identification of himself as privileged subject *of* hell – a mistake that necessarily results in his being the visible essence of the very principle of hell itself: "Così s'osserva in

[31]

Figure 19. St. Denis: "Tunc erigens se sancti viri corpus exanime, apprehendit propriis manibus sanctum caput abscissum" (*Legenda Aurea*) [Raising itself, the lifeless body of the holy man then grasped with his own hands the sacred severed head]

[32] Cinema is an excellent instrument for holding in mind the structure of auto-spectral or self-projective being. A mixture of common sense and rumor, going back at least to the Middle Ages, lets us know that life near/after death is intensely self-filmic: "The fret and fury of immediate responses to the changing situations of earthly life is replaced in life after death by a more leisurely mood freed from the urgency of immediately needed actions. All the experience of the earthly career is now available for reflection in a form more vivid than is possible through memory in earthly life. The snapshots of earthly life have all been taken on the cinematic film of the mind and it is now time to study the original earthly life through the magnified projections of the filmed record on the screen of subjectivised consciousness" (*Discourses* 3.64). Auto-spectrality is cinematic in the sense that watching the film of one's life means being both alive and dead in a wonderful way. My life is over, but I am still experiencing it. I still live, but I am already dead. Something like this seems to be the natural state of all things to themselves, the reality of their being whoever they are. So the universal chaos or the cosmic abyss, instead of being an absolute place or principle from which everything contingently hangs, is more like the spontaneous cosmic machine or ultimate undesignable instrument through which the auto-spectral existence of each being is maintained simultaneously as itself and as a relation to innumerable other unpredictable beings. The evolution of consciousness as projection is a major theme of Meher Baba's writings, in which God or the Real is portrayed as a kind of absolute spontaneous projector of itself: "When it manifests, the Nothing, which is most finite and latent in the Everything, projects out from a most finite point in the Everything where the Nothing as most finite is embodied. . . . when the most finite Nothing gets projected as Nothingness through the most finite creation point, which is also in the infinity pervaded by the infinite trio-nature of God, the projection of the most finite Nothingness—closely linked with and upheld by the all-pervading infinite trio-nature of God—gradually expands *ad infinitum* and manifests apparently as infinite Nothingness or as infinite Creation" (*God Speaks: The Theme of Creation and Its Purpose*).

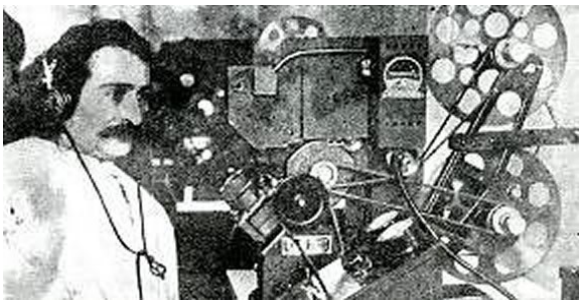


Figure 20. Meher Baba at Paramount Studios

me lo contrapasso" (28.142). That life or being-in-universe is a cinematic illusion is not at all horrible. Quite the opposite. What is horrible is that the cosmic illusion goes unrecognized as such, that it is mistaken in specific, arbitrary, and selfish ways for being real and thus becomes an object of diurnal unending general horror (worry).[33] Dante's most celebrated and intensely decapitated subject is a cinematic post-cephalic 'lesson in heresy' whose contradictory learning (doing as it does and not as it says) consists in *seeing* it as oneself whoever you are, seeing that *every* other is "grande come questa," as great as this. A lesson very similar to that presented, like a new and terrifying Platonic cave parable, in Lovecraft's *Through the Gates of the Silver Key*, easily interpretable as projective allegory of the silver screen or true picture of the reality that cinema per se represents:[34]

> For the rite of the Silver Key, as practiced by Randolph Carter in that black, haunted cave within a cave, did not prove unavailing. From the first gesture and syllable an aura of strange, awesome mutation was apparent – a sense of incalculable disturbance and confusion in time and space . . . Now there was neither cave nor absence of cave; neither wall nor absence of wall. There was only a flux of impressions no so much visual and cerebral, amidst which the entity that was Randolph Carter experienced perceptions or registrations of all that his mind revolved on, yet without any clear consciousness of the way in which he received them.[35]

Bertran's carrying of his lantern-like projective head is a corresponding suspension of the *how* of consciousness that unveils the capital illusion of head itself as locus and agent of vision. It is a real fiction whose horror is to exacerbate a 'martyrically' revealed fact: the reality of something else that sees seeing, an unbeheadable or acephalic witness of one's own vision that cannot possibly be a self in any ordinary sense. To see this requires no illumination other than the simple blind rediscovery of one's own head as obscure cameral twin of the dark cosmos, the cave within the cave of which Lovecraft speaks.

*

Cinema is more than moving photography, more than motion picture. It is also and essentially a form of writing, a scripting of phantasmatic experience. To understand its

[33] Presumably a truly *universal* or absolutely wholesale mistaking of being-in-universe for the real would hold other, anarcho-paradisical possibilities. Whence the mystical telos of horror, to realize life as illusion via the anamnesis of *negative* wonder: "Wonder had gone away, and he had forgotten that all life is only a set of pictures in the brain, among which there is no difference betwixt those born of real things and those born of inward dreamings. . . . What he failed to recall was that the deeds of reality are just as inane and childish, and even more absurd because their actors persist in fancying them full of meaning and purpose as the blind cosmos grinds aimlessly on from nothing to something and from something back to nothing again, neither heeding nor knowing the wishes or existence of the minds that flicker for a second now and then in the darkness" (H. P. Lovecraft, "The Silver Key," in *The Dreams in the Witch House and Other Weird Stories*, ed. S. T. Joshi [New York: Penguin, 2004], 252).

[34] "The allegory of the cave is the text of a signifier of desire which haunts the invention of cinema and the history of its invention" (Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen [New York: Columbia University Press, 1986], 307).

[35] H. P. Lovecraft, "Through the Gate of the Silver Key," *Dreams in the Witch House*, 272. The cinematic structure of Lovecraftian atheological gnosis – the reason it demands to but cannot be represented *in* cinema, that cinematic production is necessarily yet obsessively blind to it – is literalized in *From Beyond*: "Suddenly I myself became possessed of a kind of augmented sight. Over and above the luminous and shadowy chaos arose a picture which, though vague, held the elements of consistency and permanence. It was indeed somewhat familiar, for the unusual part was superimposed upon the usual terrestrial scene much as a cinema view may be thrown upon the painted curtain of a theatre" (28). Cinematic unrepresentability is formally identical to the non-locatability of self as head in the sense that cinema does not portray, but *is* headless seeing. Cf. "The self as imperceptible, Carter's great horror revelation, affects the reader of Lovecraft but only through the project of baroque spectatorship can this be felt cinematically. To represent it is an anathema" (Patricia MacCormack, *Cinesexuality* [Burlington: Ashgate, 2008], 94).

decollative logic thus requires thinking the relation between beheading and script: a form of writing that is essentially non-inscriptional, that removes itself from the written, the extra-written filmic thing that is rather an object of writing beyond writing, a kind of unfinishing postscript. The relation between the two (beheading and script) is immediately obvious as a pure intersection of what is removed: the identity of head and script as something whose removal is at the center of cinematic event. Of course innumerable things are removed in the course of cinematic production. Most are of the order of scaffolding or worldly supports. Only head and script, I will posit, are *essentially removed* in cinema, removed at a profound level or intensive degree that only they can (and must) be removed in order for cinema to take place.

The removal of head and script do not happen one after the other, but are operative as one continuous movement: a confiscation of script that sets in motion the beheaded cinematic subject as re-emergent *scriptor*. Script is not read or interpreted from or through a film. Rather it is written anew through the severing of the head of the one who witnesses it, who sees it with understanding, a severing whose efficient cause is the removal of script itself. Script corresponds, basically, to *what is supposed to happen*. That is what it encodes. But for it to happen in film, that is, for the movie to virtually event rather than only masqueradingly present its happening, script must be confiscated in a manner that seamlessly installs the viewer's severed head (the post-capital perceptual center that is mobiley captured by the cameral effect) as its 'intimate' spontaneous speaker. It is the efficiency and cleanness of this confiscation that constitutes the cinematic art, a causing-by-stealing-to-more-impressively-reappear whose perfection equates to keeping our trunkless heads, like still spinning tops, speaking as long as possible. Good cinema is like a good beheading. The executioner decapitates the victim in one clean stroke and raises the head, liminally still living (enjoying the movie), for all to see. Bad cinema is like a bad beheading. The headsman botches the job, pathetically butchering the victim so that their head, when raised aloft, has already flown the realm of being theirs (not enjoying the movie) and is only part of a corpse. In one direction, cinema heads toward hagiographic cephalophory, the killing of someone who outlives their being beheaded in a dramatic, eternalizing way. In the other direction, cinema heads towards stillborn, merely staged execution, the beheading of someone who is already dead.

This is why, after the confiscation of Hallaj's prayer for martyrdom, the Sufi's severed head remains speaking for the duration of a feature-length film:

> In his pocket they found a sheet of paper on which was written in his own hand the verse of the Throne (Qur'an 2:256), followed by this prayer (*du'-a'*): 'O God, inure my heart to submit to You, cut away from my spirit all that is not You, teach me Your Supreme Name (*ism a'zam*), grant me whatever You permit and deprive me of whatever You forbid, give me what no one cares about, through the truth of *H.M.S.'.Q.* [Sura 42 initials], and make me die a martyr of *K.H.I.'.S* [Sura 19 initials].' They confiscated this paper, and then he was beheaded. The trunk remained erect for two hours and the head fell between his two legs, repeating a single phrase 'Only One! O Only One!' And when people drew near him, they saw that his blood spilling on the ground had written 'God! God! God!' in *thirty-five* places.[36]

As the number of times the martyr's body bloodily exscribes the name of God corresponds to the conventional maximum number of sequences in a modern sound film,[37] so the scene allegorizes the maximal production of cinematic script as an effective martyrdom, the killing of someone whose dying gives witness, in the mode of spiritual birth, to what is never born and never dies. The fate of

[36] Louis Massignon, *The Passsion of Al-Hallaj*, trans. Herbert Mason, 4 vols., Bollingen XCVIII (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 2.18.1

[37] "A sound film would most commonly contain between fourteen and thirty-five sequences" (David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1985], 62). Many of Stanley Kubrick's films, for example, have "the same number of narrative units: thirty-five" (Mario Falsetto, *Stanley Kubrick: A Narrative and Stylistic Analysis*, 2nd ed. [Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001], 8).

place in this scenario is fantastic, occupying an indescribable third zone between the singular topical stillness of the beheaded trunk and the multiplication of sites for the divine name that become legible in nearness. This zone could be called nearness itself, or the nearness of nearness – only the word would appear to locate it on a spectrum between presence and remoteness, losing sight of the fact that for this kind of nearness, both the absolutely here and the infinitely remote are equally proximate. What gives or grounds this 'nearness' (which might be written n*ear*ness in order distinguish it from ordinary spatial nearness and address its sonic quality: the auricular hyper-intimacy of a musical becoming-immanent of the visible) is screen, khoric placeless place identified by Lovecraft as "neither wall nor absence of wall," the barrier behind everything that all vision sees through *without* passage. Screen is the immediate material analog of the substantial invisible unity of all things, the unity that consists, not in their being-one, but in their being 'on screen' or com-positionally with the only One, the one-without-number which is thinkable solely through topological error, for instance, by conceiving the One as either 'behind' the screen, beyond it, or as screen 'itself'. As intimated in Polanski's parting shot-gaze of Macbeth's head (see note 6), the martyric vision of the beheaded constitutes a simultaneous being-seen and becoming-eye of the screen of the real. The simultaneity of this being-becoming signals the fulfillment of script-to-screen transition, the arrival of the eye into radical theory or realization of vision as very root of the seen. As Eckhart says, "the eye in which I see God is the same eye in which God sees me."[38] Here, in a vision whose eye is the organ of a radically singular non-individuated identity, Dionysius's "being neither oneself nor someone else" (*Mystical Theology*, 1001A), one – whoever that is – wholly and really is the writing of the name of the invisible. Joining camera and projector in the single unitive eye of a severed body, the beheaded mystic prophesies cinema, without reference, by being it, by incarnating in the dilated space of its scission "a certain type of filming capable of . . . letting us travel to the confines of creation through the simple juxtaposition of a small number of trembling images [i.e. thirty-five signatures of God]. In this radical impressionism, the never-seen would be within our grasp. The cinema would become the perfect instrument for the revelation of possible worlds which coexist right alongside our own."[39] That is, an instrument of revelation re-lying on nothing other than being what it reveals (re-veils), a scaffold built on the nothingness of life itself or its being-cinema (Fig. 21). Shutter of the world. "Something had happened to the lighting, there was something wrong with the sun, and a section of the sky was shaking."[40]

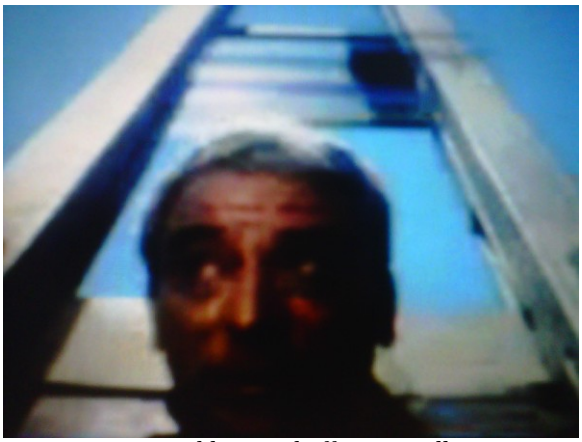


Figure 21. Franklin J. Schaffner, *Papillon* (1973)

After

Assume decapitation and cinema are inseparably linked and see what happens. Cut one from the other and observe their connections spread into subtle filaments stretching between public execution, horror cinema, and the cameral logic of film. The black-veiled homology between headsman and cameraman, guillotine and photography.[41] The

[38] Meister Eckhart, *Complete Mystical Works*, Sermon 57.

[39] Raúl Ruiz, *Poetics of Cinema*, trans. Brian Holmes (Paris: Dis Voir, 2005), 90.

[40] Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov (New York: Capricorn, 1959), 219.

[41] An illustrative example is Weegee's (aka Arthur Fellig) "Human Head Cake Box Murder," a photograph showing detectives looking on as a veiled photographer captures the image of a severed head found in a cake box on the street in New York. A figure in the upper right corner, visually

conspicuous presence of decapitation (using the decollative technique of substitution splicing) in early cinema: *The Execution of Mary Queen of Scots* (Edison, 1895); *Beheading the Chinese Prisoner* (Lubin, 1900); *Histoire d'un crime* (Zecca, 1901), *Judith et Holopherne* (Feuillade, 1909). The surreptitious filming of the last public execution (of Eugen Weidmann) by guillotine in France (Figure 22) – a perfect coincidence that transitionally marks in one stroke an identity and separation of spectacular beheading and cinematic horror.[42] Indeed horror movie star Christopher Lee was present at the event: "They rushed Wiedmann to that extraordinary structure, so that his feet came off the ground. . . . the plank tilted forward and the man they called the Photographer adjusted

his head. In that instant the knife fell, and I thought I would die myself."[43]

Cinema synthesizes the *specular* horror of beheading spectacle. The representation of decapitation in cinema is thus inherently folded reversely into filmic self-framing, the thematic-imagistic reflection of cinematic structure within itself. Beheading is a place, a topos where cinema becomes conspicuous, where the identity of the two is representationally established through intersecting juxtaposition. Cinema *transplants* decapitation, fitting its logic to a new body that necessarily reverberates with the old.

Figure 23. Paul Morrissey, *Flesh for Frankenstein* (1973)

This transplanting dynamic is realized in a moment from *Flesh for Frankenstein* (Fig. 23), in which the identitarian aporia of cephalic transplantation – "How can it be *not exactly him* if it is him?" asks Mrs. Frankenstein – is made to apply to the scene of its being thought. Here the head that ponders the problem (of a friend whose head has been grafted onto another body) is specularly beheaded in a cinematic frame so as to double and mirror

connected to the head via his shadow, is nicely decapitated by the cropping. See http://metmuseum.org (Accession Number 1987.1100.92). The link between photographer and headsman is easily expressed with reference to celebrity headlust in an 1878 volume of *The British Journal of Photography*: "no sooner does a man achieve fame than a craving arises to possess his photograph, and, as no one is able to resist the demand, the photographer – more merciful than the headsman of old – proceeds to take off his head" (25.425). The headsman in Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*, M'sieur Pierre, is a photographer. The guillotine is "la sœur de la photographie" [the sister of photography] ("Un portrait de guillotiné ou l'usage politique de la guillotine," *Le Webzine de l'Histoire* <http:// http://thucydide.over-blog.net/article-27406765.html>). "The guillotine . . . gives rise to a new pictorial genre: the portrait of guillotined people. First in engravings . . . Then in photographs: in French, to be photographed was slang for to be guillotined. The assistant executioner whose duty was to make sure the head fell into the basket was called the Photographer. The guillotine is a photographic shutter or a 'colossal easel' that executes the portrait of condemned men and women" (Etienne Chaumbaud, "Notes towards a Counter-History of Separation"). For more in this vein, See Daniel Arasse, *The Guillotine and the Terror*, trans. Christopher Miller (New York: Penguin, 1989), 140ff. The sliding blade principle is also deployed in camera technology: the guillotine shutter.

[42] Out of these strands one might also weave the predictable theory that terrorist beheading videos threaten and menace, through a form of representational short-circuit, the cinematic structure of state power.

[43] Christopher Lee, *Christopher Lee: Tall, Dark, and Gruesome* (Midnight Marquee Press, 1999), 55

forth the head of John the Baptist presented to Salome in a dish (within the background painting) – the originary decapitation of Western culture. The perplexed contemplator of beheading's undoing of the self/head equation is correlatively 'beheaded', virtually or phantasmatically, in a manner that establishes the viewer as a beheaded third on a continuum with the decapitated Precursor. The only real, present head in the frame is Mrs. Frankenstein's, that of the one who cannot at all (or cannot stand to) see what her lover-servant is talking about, the parallel to Salome who would bury his troubled head in her own sexual unconscious. So the scene ends with a shot of her face occluding the head-capturing mirror by means of its own downward head-giving movement (Fig. 24).

Figure 24. Paul Morrissey, *Flesh for Frankenstein* (1973)

The deeper cinematic work of the scene, the concept more profound than the castration plot, thus concerns the production of cinema's witness as a living captured head existing at the crossroads of acephalousness and cephalophory, indeterminately somewhere between the pure loss of head (negatively being no one) and the playful transcendence of the capital (positively being neither oneself nor someone else). Crucially, the indeterminacy is encoded *ab initio*, in the ur-martyrdom of the 'last prophet' who is not properly a martyr (in the sense of a death-witness to the faith), in the head whose halo is a dish. Played forward into the ungraspable and open third zone of the live viewer or real witness, it is precisely this indeterminacy that ensures, against the seduction to banal headlessness or hyper-illusion (cinema as merely dream-within-dream), a new or extra possibility, that of bringing the life-dream to an end through itself, of executing real illusion through a kind of fatal auto-reflection. Like the dream-gate through which the speaker of Lovecraft's *Ex Oblivione* escapes – "happier than I had ever dared hope to be, I dissolved again into that native infinity of crystal oblivion from which the daemon Life had called me for one brief and desolate hour" – this potentially or open-door of cinema is equivalent to its becoming-halo in the sense traced by Agamben:

> One can think of the halo . . . as a zone in which possibility and reality, potentiality and actuality, become indistinguishable. The being that has reached its end, that has consumed all of its possibilities thus receives as a gift [*in dote*] a supplemental possibility. . . . Its beatitude is that of a potentiality that comes only after the act, of matter that does not remain beneath the form, but surrounds it with a halo [*la circonda e l'aureola*].[44]

The becoming-halo of cinema, as intimated in the nested decapitating boundaries in the *Flesh for Frankenstein* image (dish, painting, mirror frame, screen border), means the realization of its being a frameless frame (framing matter that does not remain beneath the form of frame), the non-supernatural but nonetheless brilliant glow around the severed head of its witness that testifies to one's having left oneself or 'life' behind without remainder, to having reached the real, non-terminal end of things. Cinema or life-on-screen is a dish becoming supplementarily beatified, a matter becoming halo, by the placement of our head on it. It is an art essentially ordered, neither to providing nor to suspending experience, neither to adventure or to entertainment, but to bringing experience to an end, to reaching oneself through to the very end of it. Cinema is somewhere, a khoric scaffold where the human being directs itself to "the threshold . . . [where] he must throw himself headlong into that

[44] Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 54. Original cited from *La communità che viene* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2001). Agamben is following Aquinas's understanding of the halo as a surplus to perfection, something that adds to it by adding nothing: "beatitudo includit in se omnia bona quae sunt necessaria ad perfectam hominis vitam, quae consistit in perfecta hominis operatione; sed quaedam possunt superaddi non quasi necessaria ad perfectam operationem, ut sine quibus esse non possit, sed quia his additis est beatitudo clarior" (*Scriptum super Sententiis*, 4.49.5, *Opera Omnia*).

which has no foundation and has no head."[45] To understand this requires that we invert the usual genus/species ordering of cinema and horror, that we see cinema as a species of horror, a way or mode of horror itself. It is precisely this vision that cinematic decapitation scenes provide.

For example:

Figures 25 and 26: Dario Argento, *Suspiria* (1977). Exposing the fact that decapitation, its very idea, is an exacerbated intensity of the cameral,[46] an unanswerable question as to what happens to head (as cameral locus of consciousness, vision, identity, etc.) when it is cut off or severed from the whole of which it is dialectically part, cinematic decapitation scenes frame the event of beheading with themes of vision, screen, mirror, glass, as if to show that beheading itself is definable as what happens when one is pressed through the cinematic machine. Not a beheading scene, and it still is.

[45] Georges Bataille, "The Obelisk," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 222. "L' être humain arrive au seuil: là il est nécessaire de se précipiter vivant dans ci qui n'a plus d'assise ni de tête" (*Oeuvres completes*, 12 vols. [Paris: Gallimard, 1970-88], 1: 13).

[46] Cf. St. Paul's beheading, as narrated in the *Legenda Aurea*: "Nero called out: 'Off with his head! . . . Then we shall see whether he can live forever!' Paul: 'So that you may know that I live eternally after the death of the body, when my head has been cut off, I will appear to you alive. Then you will be able to realize that Christ is the God of life, not of death.' Then he . . . tied Plantilla's veil over his eyes, knelt on the ground on both knees, bent his neck, and so was beheaded. . . . As the blow fell [*in ipso ictu*], blessed Paul took off the veil [*explicuit velum*], caught his own blood in it, rolled it up and folded it, and gave it to the woman" (Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan, 2 vols [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993], 1.353; Latin cited from Graesse edition). The scene exposes faith as form of cinematic experience. The apostle's beheading shows its own impossibility as the visibility of faith itself, defined by Paul as "the evidence of things that appear not" (Heb 11:1). It is the reverse projection of the understanding that faith gives ("ut ex invisibilis visibilia fierent" Heb 11:3), a specular production of the invisible by the visible. Or as Augustine says, "we are the limbs of that head; this body cannot be decapitated" [*illius enim capitis membra sumus. Non potest hoc corpus decollari*]. This invisible visibility, which the double meaning of *explicuit* (unfold, explain) makes impossible not to see, *explicates* the veil, interprets the *integumentum*, revealing it to be the head itself. The head is the veil, a fiction whose nature is visible only in its denaturing, a thing becoming itself only in negation.

Figures 27-31: Dario Argento, *Four Flies on Grey Velvet* (1971). Experimenting with the intimacy of beheading and cameral motion, Argento here procures a special camera (like Antonioni uses to capture explosions in *Zabriskie Point*) with speed of 30000 images per second to film the final decapitation scene. A woman's beheading in a car crash is spliced with the sequence of a Saudi beheading. But rather than using the slow motion to isolate and extend the severing per se, the focus is on the dissolution of the window-shield into a multitude of mirror-like shards, establishing an identity between decapitation and world-to-screen and screen-to-world dissolution.

Figures 32-35: Richard Donner, *The Omen* (1976). Hollywood's first major on-screen beheading crashes specular glass into glass, dramatizing decapitation as auto-blinding unseeability. The glass sheet that severs the head doubles as mirror in which the victim glimpses his own severed head. The shattering of the window corresponds to decapitation as an irreparable breaking of that through which world is seen – a breaking that the living head of the witness cannot bear seeing, or can see only in blinding itself towards it. The demonically accidental, horribly surprising nature of the event is crucial and carries a complex significance. On the one hand its problem is theodical, bearing upon the banal availability of worldly causality to evil, a perverse openness to senseless destruction that seems to violate or threaten the very substantiality of the good. On the other hand, the orchestrated instantaneousness of the beheading, a spontaneous aesthetic masterpiece, communicates the transcendent virtue of that openness, a power in things to be all of a sudden more and other than they are. The limit of the contrast is synthesized in the beheading itself, which appears simultaneously as an ultimate traumatizing shock and as a supreme death, a perfect pulling off of the inevitable, as if decapitation could be a mode of death that preempts death's own event, that demonstrates its essential escapability. The beheading spectacle doubles and couples the head in a manner that ultimately problematizes and usurps the contest between good and evil, mating maximal violence with intimated evidence of inviolable spiritual reality. "When

thou seest in the pathway a severed head . . . / Ask of it, ask of it the secrets of the heart: / For of it thou wilt learn of our hidden mystery."[47] The head, simply by its severing, becomes witness to something invisible. The sense of this can be grasped through the problem beheading poses to thinking evil as privation. Beheading removes head only to produce it as such, showing it never to have been there in the first place. And yet the severed head is not a true head, but a material remnant and image of one, revealing that the head itself was never severed and/or that it only ever was an image or idea of itself. As this logic corresponds to the traditional formulation of good and evil (evil as privation of good that never substantially touches it), so beheading spectacularly proposes, in the mirror between head and its severing, a third thing beyond-within these terms.

[47] Jalal al-Din Rumi, *Selected Poems from the Divani Shamzi Tabriz*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977], II.5-8.

Figures 36-44. Dario Argento, *Phenomena* (1985). A boy is secluded from the horror of his own image. This is my ordinary condition, in that I can never see myself in the mirror, or, I see myself in the mirror only insofar as the mirror decapitates me. "My visual body is certainly an object as far as its parts far removed from my head are concerned, but as we come nearer to the eyes, it becomes divorced from objects, and reserves among them a quasi-space to which they have no access, and when I try to fill this void by recourse to the image in the mirror, it refers me back to an original of the body which is not out there among things, but in my own province, on this side of all things seen" (Merleau-Ponty). The boy (Patua, an allusion to the genetic disorder Patau's syndrome), figures the intense ignorance of the very truth his body monstrates, that head is a veil. He lives in an underworld of covered mirrors: the precise condition of never-ending facial self-identification, total blindness to the real present depth, the fact that "life is a hideous thing, and from the background behind what we know of it peer daemoniacal hints of truth which make it sometimes a thousandfold more hideous" (Lovecraft). The boy is accordingly defaced to death by a swarm of flies, perhaps the supreme exemplar, particularly in their carrion-eating capacity, of acephalic being. There is a perfect juxtaposition of face and swarm in the cutting of the scene, as if swarm is what face especially recognizes, the secret gravity of its necessary dissolution. "The face is produced only when the head ceases to be a part of the body, when it ceases to have a multidimensional polyvocal corporeal code — when the body, head included, has been decoded" (Deleuze & Guattari). After the instant beheading of the father figure (an icon of the non-existence of a first head from which everything dependably derives and can be referred back to), the tool-using ape (Cf. Poe's *Murders in the Rue Morgue*) providentially appears to deface the enemy who threatens to behead the girl with a flexible mirror. This signifies the releasing of the human form from the horror of its own illusory identity. The girl, who passes between the acephalic swarm and the beheading event, figures *one* who can swim happily through the distorting mirror of reality.

Figures 45-6. Nicholas Winding Refn, *Valhalla Rising* (2009)[48]

One can only *be* head if the face of the universe becomes one's own. This is the capital task of cinema.

[48] The scene beautifully elides the beheading itself by splicing the speaking head with its being carried by the hero.